



The Office of Strategic Services: Training in the Forest



*OSS Communications
Recruits Training at
Area C -- today the
craft lodge at Cabin
Camp 4*



Chopawamsic RDA in Peace and in War

During the 1930s, the Civilian Conservation Corps built the Chopawamsic Recreational Demonstration Area (today’s Prince William Forest Park) near the villages of Joplin and Hickory Ridge, Virginia. Designed as a nature retreat for the underprivileged youth of nearby Washington, D.C., its cabin camps had no sooner been completed than war descended upon Europe. Some of the larger CCC projects, including cabin camps at Chopawamsic and at Catoctin Mountain Park in Maryland, attracted the attention of military planners looking for secure areas to train recruits for secret missions overseas.

*... to “facilitate the
securing of information
important for national
security not now
available to the
Government.”*

President Franklin D.
Roosevelt, July 11, 1941

Before 1941, the United States had no single agency responsible for collecting intelligence. Rather, diplomats, soldiers, and others gathered information on sensitive topics during their normal activities. They also cultivated secret sources of information in foreign governments and industries.

However, after the German invasion of Poland in 1939, President Franklin D. Roosevelt decided that U.S. intelligence operations needed unified command. In July of 1941, he named William J. Donovan, a New York lawyer and Medal of Honor recipient, as the nation’s Coordinator of

Information. As its Coordinator, Donovan led this new agency, the Office of Strategic Services, in collecting and analyzing intelligence and conducting special operations, especially in Europe and Asia. As the war progressed, Major General Donovan became the commander of more than 12,000 OSS operatives, military and civilian. The military’s Joint Chiefs of Staff supervised the OSS. OSS agents helped guide the 1942 Torch landings in North Africa, supported Allied bombing campaigns in Europe, and conducted guerilla activities in Yugoslavia, Burma, and other countries. President Harry S. Truman dissolved the OSS in October 1945.

Chosen for Top-secret Assignments

Most OSS recruits held college degrees and were under 30. Many came from families with money for higher education and travel, while some, chosen for their language skills, came from families of recent immigrants. Women were nearly one- third of its employees, serving as field operatives or in clerical positions. Chef Julia Child and actress Marlene Dietrich both served in the OSS. Among its other prominent members were diplomat Ralph Bunche and future Supreme Court Justice Arthur Goldberg. Future Central Intelligence Agency directors Allen

Dulles, Richard Helms, William Colby, and William Casey also served in the OSS.

The OSS wanted recruits with an “ability to get along with other people” and a “freedom from disturbing prejudice.” One period writer stated that “race, color, and previous condition of servitude cut no ice whatever” with the OSS “so long as one actually wanted to get into the fray and help to win it.” People from the political left and right worked together in support of the Allied war effort.

Training in the Chopawamsic RDA

At least nine secret areas, identified by letter, trained OSS recruits. From 1942 to 1945 Areas A and C were located in the park’s cabin camps. Area A, today cabin camps 2, 3 and 5, trained Special Operations recruits to operate behind enemy lines in morale and physical subversion. One of a recruit’s tasks at Area A was to conceal their own identity while trying to find out as much as possible about the backgrounds of fellow trainees. They also learned how to use weapons, radios and codes, to make and disarm booby traps, and to make parachute jumps from airplanes. Recruits lived in the cabins – which were bugged – and ate in the dining halls. One of

the mess sergeants previously worked as a hotel chef in New York; one OSS recruit remembered his food as “wonderful.” Depending on the course offered, training lasted between two and four weeks.

Area C trained a different division of the OSS: its Communications Branch. At cabin camps 1 and 4, recruits learned Morse code and ciphers, covert radio practices, weapons, and martial arts. Many of the recruits trained in Area C operated ham radios before the war and went on to serve at OSS communications centers in such places as Rome, Italy; Kunming, China; and Calcutta, India.

The OSS and Local Residents

Over the four years of its development, Chopawamsic RDA gradually displaced many of the 150 households previously living within its bounds, one- quarter of whom were African- American. Still, in creating the Recreational Demonstration Area, the CCC acquired land slowly, and not every household had been moved out of the park when the U.S. entered the Second World War.

Secrecy was a basic part of OSS training in Chopawamsic RDA. Barbed- wire fences and guard dogs surrounded its borders, preventing many local residents from hunting or visiting family cemeteries.

Some households still living in the park were given mere weeks to vacate their homes and little assistance in moving during the autumn of 1942. If landowners held deeds to their property – and many did not – they were eventually paid an average of \$50 per acre, regardless of buildings or other improvements. Homes and outbuildings became targets of demolition training exercises for OSS recruits. Simultaneous land acquisitions by the U.S. Navy for the expansion of its Marine base at Quantico left many locals feeling embittered towards the federal government and with few options to effectively contest its actions.

The Legacy of the OSS in Prince William Forest Park

Artifacts of the park’s past are still found today. Many OSS training exercises used live ammunition. Unexploded bullets or shells, while rarely found, are very dangerous. Do not disturb them. Please contact a Park Ranger if you find any while visiting the park. These artifacts and others are clues to the park’s past and are protected by federal law.

Few visible signs of the OSS remain in Prince William Forest Park. However, the cabin camps where they trained are still used by groups today for

outdoor recreation. OSS recruits lived in the cabins and studied in buildings built as craft halls or dining areas. A plaque at cabin camp 4 recognizes OSS communications recruits who trained there. An ammunition storage building is on Liming Lane.

The OSS built ten weapons ranges and three demolition areas in Chopawamsic RDA. It removed these facilities after the war, and no noticeable traces of them remain.

Where May I Find More Information About the OSS?

There are many materials about the Office of Strategic Services, its role in the Second World War, and its legacies. Books you may find at your local library include:

Chalou, George C., ed. *The Secrets War: The Office of Strategic Services in World War II*. Washington: National Archives and Records Administration, 1992.

Dawidoff, Nicholas. *The Catcher Was a Spy*. New York: Pantheon, 1994.

McIntosh, Elizabeth P. *Sisterhood of Spies: The Women of the OSS*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1998.

Smith, R. Harris. *OSS: The Secret History of America’s First Central Intelligence Agency*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972.

Troy, Thomas F. *Wild Bill and Intrepid: Bill Donovan, Bill Stephenson, and the Origin of the CIA*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.

Volkman, Ernest. *Spies: The Secret Agents Who Changed the Course of History*. New York: John Wiley, 1994.

The internet also has information about the OSS, including:

Clark, J. Ransom. “The Literature of Intelligence: A Bibliography of Materials, with Essays, Reviews, and Comments.” <http://intellit.muskingum.edu/intellsite/index.html>. October 2001. Guide to articles and books on various intelligence topics, including the OSS, by a retired CIA agent and college administrator.

Nelson, Wayne. “Undercover Women of the OSS.” http://www.thehistorynet.com/WorldWarII/articles/1997/07973_text.htm . October 2001. Short article describing how women serving in the OSS affected the Allied invasion of southern France.

Warner, Michael. “The Office of Strategic Services: America’s First Intelligence Agency.”<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/oss>. May 2000. Brief official Central Intelligence Agency examination of the history of its predecessor.

Marine Major Albert Jenkins, the Commanding Officer for Area C, Training Recruits on the Pistol Range

